

Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland

Social Media Policy & Procedure

Purpose and foundation

Social media has become an integral part of the lives of many in our society and something which we as a denomination cannot ignore in its relevance or usefulness.

“We don’t have a choice on whether we DO social media, the question is how well we DO it. Social Media isn’t a fad, it’s a fundamental shift in the way we communicate.” Erik Qualman (author and keynote speaker on social media)

The NSPCI recognises that many of our churches and members wish to have an online presence and participate in the world of social media. We encourage and support the use of such a dynamic, multi-faceted and engaging forum and view it with positivity and offering much potential. As the online world continues to expand and develop, providing a range of forums and applications in which we can partake, it is important that the NSPCI maintains a relevant, contemporary voice which reflects our church, its members and its traditions. We believe that we have a responsibility to spread our message as far and wide as possible, including taking our place in the mission field of the online world.

Mark 16: 15

“Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

Moving Forward

However, as with all things new, a new way of thinking is required. It is essential therefore to equip ourselves with the correct knowledge, skills and values when tackling the opportunities and challenges of the world of social media. We must ensure we have the correct level of guidance for all church members and training for those undertaking the role of church page administrators, editors or moderators. As with any job or task, we should do all we can to ensure best practice going forward.

Social media at a glance.

What to be aware of. Social media is:

- Immediate, quick, instant, live - we should be considered in our content and not reactive.
- Permanent - once posted, content can usually be retrieved, even if deleted.
- Open-ended - online discussions can continue indefinitely as long as they remain open to new viewers.
- Public not private - know your privacy settings and those of any group or page you interact with.
- Able to make associations with various groups via tagging and membership - ensure these are fitting and reflective of yourself and/or the church.

Positives. Social media is:

- Interactive and conversational, allowing engagement with many people on a range of topics.
- Live, contemporaneous and open-ended - it is always moving, changing and developing, its content is not static.
- Dynamic and full of various formats - apps, programmes, forums, range of content and their capacity is continually changing and developing. There is very little that cannot be shared online.
- Able to have extensive reach - with little effort, it is possible to engage with individuals across the entire globe.
- Easily accessed - it is one of the most readily accessible mediums of contemporary communication.
- Inexpensive - unless using boosters for the purposes of advertising or assisted 'reach', it is entirely cost-free, taking only time and effort.

As with all forums and formats of communication, there are positives and negatives. However with the right knowledge, guidance and policies in place, we can make effective use of all the positives, whilst being mindful of best practice.

General Conduct

All members and particularly those who hold elected offices within our churches and at denominational level are both representatives and ambassadors of our individual churches, denomination and the wider Christian church. As such, just as with our face to face interactions, our conduct online should be reflective of the values and principles of our non-subscribing, liberal Christian tradition.

Galatians 5:22

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Colossians 4:6

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

However, it is important to make some distinctions in our guidance and policies between members, those holding elected office and those responsible for the editing, administration and moderating of our church's social media pages and websites.

Official Church pages

- Where possible NSPCI social media pages should be established and maintained by two adults, one of which should have agreed ultimate responsibility as page

moderator or chief editor. This individual is then directly responsible to their individual church.

- Editors, administrators and moderators of official NSPCI social media pages have full responsibility for the content. All content should be regularly reviewed and monitored. Posts and comments may be removed if it is felt they are not in keeping with NSPCI principles, values and ethics.
- Be accurate in what you write and ensure that you have all the facts about your subject. If you make a mistake, admit it and be quick to correct it. If you are unsure as to the accuracy of your information, do not post it until clarification is sought and accuracy ascertained.
- Any comments that include profanity or language considered explicit should be removed. Any comments considered inappropriate, personally derogatory, inflammatory, or offensive should be removed.
- Any comments or content which refers to illegal activity or pertains to defamation, libel, discrimination, hate speech or that reflects behaviour which is likely to bring the denomination into disrepute, should be removed.
- Anonymous comments or content may be removed, unless it is with the clear purpose of ensuring confidentiality or protection of a vulnerable individual or minor.
- Page Editors, Administrators and Moderators reserve the right to block any individuals who persistently or excessively breach these standards.
- Page Editors, Administrators and moderators are not responsible for the archiving or preservation of information, documents, photos, videos or any other media which is shared or posted by other individuals.
- Where there are concerns over the copyright or legality of content this should be removed.
- Page Editors, Administrators and Moderators should avoid sharing their own political or religious views and be mindful that they should represent and reflect the views of their collective church.
- Any complaints should be dealt with by the individual with agreed ultimate responsibility for the page. Should the nature of the complaint refer to any matter other than the social media page content, this should be forwarded to the relevant church or denominational governing body.
- If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome, they should be offered to forward their complaint to the denominational Social Media Team. Should the matter still remain unresolved it should be referred to the denominational Media Office.

Privacy and Legal Considerations

- Page Editors and Moderators must ensure compliance with any relevant privacy policies and legislation. This specifically includes copyright, confidentiality and data protection.
- Due care and attention should be taken to safeguard the privacy interests of other NSPCI members. In particular, personal information (that is, information that can reasonably identify a particular person, including name, phone number, address or email address) should not be disclosed without the prior written or verbal consent of the person identified. This includes ensuring the individual is aware of the privacy settings of the page on which their information will be shared.
- Consent must always be sought from an appropriate adult, guardian, those with parental responsibility or next of kin for the sharing of any information or images relating to a minor or vulnerable adult.
- Where consent is inferred or assumed (eg photos specifically taken for social media), it is still best practice to clarify and ask before sharing.

Guidance for Sunday School Superintendents and anyone working with children or young people

- We encourage all adults working with minors in any capacity within our denomination to set stringent privacy settings on their social media profiles.
- We discourage the submission of friend requests from adults to minors, being mindful that there is a distinct power imbalance between adults and minors, especially adults holding elected positions of church leadership and as such, minors may feel pressurised into accepting requests.
- Should a minor offer a friend request to an adult and this is accepted, discretion is advisory as to the level of profile access made available by the adult. If full profile access is granted by the adult, you must then be mindful of the nature and subject matter of your posts, ensuring it is appropriate for viewing and reading by a minor.
- All adults should be mindful that any correspondence between an elected church representative and a minor could be requested by church leadership, parents or other church youth workers at any given time. This is in keeping with best practice, transparency and standards for review.
- We encourage the establishment of online church chat groups for minors as a healthier and more transparent alternative to adult leaders accepting friend requests from minors. Church related online groups should have at least two adult administrators as well as any child administrators. They should be accessible to parents of child members. Ideally they should include a contract or agreement with its child members regarding content and conduct.
- Alternatively the adult could create a profile specifically for church related business and communication. Having the two separate accounts/profiles helps to create a line of privacy and maintain healthy and transparent boundaries.

- Anyone with concerns about the nature or content of material relating to a minor on any site, whether church affiliated or not, should report their suspicions without hesitation or delay to the PSNI. Issues of concern relate to any child you suspect may have been/is being or could be subjected to abuse, neglect or exploitation.
- If your concerns for a minor are church affiliated, as well as reporting them to the PSNI, you should also report them to your church's governing body. These matters must then be recorded and kept as part of official church records.

Guidance for individual members

- Even when engaging in social media for personal use, the comments of members of the NSPCI community may be viewed as a direct reflection of our denomination. Individuals should therefore use their best judgment and discretion when engaging in social media activities.
- Discussing church matters from a personal perspective runs the risk of personal opinions being interpreted as public statements. Please ensure you make it clear these are your own views and ideas.
- As ambassadors of our denomination, individual users should be mindful of the principles, values and ethics of our non-subscribing, liberal Christian tradition and ensure that their content would not impair or compromise the credibility of the NSPCI in working with other churches, individuals, bodies or organisations.
- Users should be wary of becoming embroiled in actions and discussions that could be considered harmful to the interests of our community or portray the denomination in a negative light.
- Denominational policy, documents, images, property information, business or anything proprietary to NSPCI should not be shared in any public forum without explicit permission from relevant individuals or governing bodies.
- Any posting of materials to official NSPCI church pages must be limited to materials in which the copyright is owned or you have ensured consent for sharing the materials/information.
- If you choose to write online and identify an elected position you may hold within any of our churches, please ensure you are clear about your role and its remit.
- Be careful that what you write would not impair your ability to work with any other members of your church, other church volunteers or elected representatives. Be mindful also of legislation around libel and defamation. Best guidance would be that if you wouldn't say it in church, or directly to the individual, group or organisation, don't write it online!
- Choose your method of online communication wisely and if you are unsure of the nature or content of the discussion and how it might impact on your role or that of other church members, consider private messaging, an email, a phone call or face to face discussion.

- If any of your content regarding your church or the NSPCI attracts media attention, be sure to forward this to your relevant church governing body or the denominational Media Office.
- If any members have concerns or issues relating to the content on any of our church or denominational social media pages, they should initially contact the page editor or moderator who has ultimate responsibility for the page. Should the outcome of their response prove unsatisfactory, members may forward their complaint to the denominational Social Media Team. Should dissatisfaction with outcomes remain, the matter should be forwarded to the denominational Media Office.

Any queries or uncertainties regarding any social media issue should be referred to the denominational Social Media Team or thereafter the Media Office.

Relevant Links:

- <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/apni/1955/11/contents>
- <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/48/contents>
- <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/schedule/11/crossheading/northern-ireland>
- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/northern-ireland/legislation-policy-guidance/>
- <http://www.equalityni.org/Footer-Links/Legislation>